

Discourses About Colonial Art and Their Visibility in Nineteenth-Century Chile

Marcela Drien

Center of Cultural Heritage, Adolfo Ibáñez University, Santiago of Chile

ABSTRACT Throughout the nineteenth century it was possible to appreciate a critical attitude towards colonial art, which emerged in liberal intellectual contexts seeking to promote an academic art they considered appropriate within the context of a nascent republican culture. However, those discourses animating this critical view towards the artistic production under Spanish rule in Latin America were manifested in spheres including the intellectual and the art exhibitions fields. This article seeks to examine the forms in which these instances of exhibition, visualized not only this critical spirit but also the attempts to introduce colonial art within the larger discourse of art history.

KEYWORDS Criticism, Colonial Art, Exhibitions, Miguel Luis Amunátegui, Benjamín Vicuña Mackenna.

Following Chilean Independence and throughout much of the nineteenth century, the attitudes of intellectuals towards the colonial world were characterized by a disdain that gradually began to infiltrate the artistic world. The increasingly unfavorable notions about colonial art were expressed mainly in the efforts of numerous members of the elite to establish a European academic artistic taste as the most appropriate, intending thus to form under its wing the national arts in the new republican context. The promotion of European art and the rejection of art created under colonial rule was articulated in critical texts and exhibition platforms that projected the different ways in which the colonial past and the arts produced in that period were perceived.

Indeed, the exhibitions should be regarded as platforms particularly suited for understanding the setting in which intellectuals associated with the cultural sphere utilized not only texts – for instance, the media and exhibition catalogs – to advance a discourse regarding colonial art, but also exhibition strategies that would visualize these ideas in the public domain. Thus, the exhibitions, which constituted privileged spaces for instruction and sociability, facilitated the establishment of artistic discourses as well as historical ones concerning the colonial past.

This paper seeks to analyze the way in which ideas of prominent intellectuals like Miguel Luis Amunátegui (1828-88) and Benjamín Vicuña Mackenna (1831-86) regarding colonial art, were expressed in the context of exhibitions with whose organizations they were linked during the 1850s, a

time when the Academy of Painting – created in 1849 – was developing into the most important artistic institution in the country.

At the same time, this article seeks to demonstrate that whereas Amunátegui used references to colonial as a discursive resource to install the European artistic model, colonial art was seen by Vicuña Mackenna as a way to insert Latin American art more broadly within the narrative of art history.

The disdain with which those in the nineteenth century regarded the colonial period was initially manifested in intellectual circles. Those who were conscious of the important role that art played in the political context of the viceroyalty, considered it necessary to renew the artistic language in relation to the country's new political and cultural reality. To this end they resorted primarily to the French republican imagery and to a series of images depicting the heroes of Independence.¹ In this context, already by the 1820s the jurist Juan Egaña reflected about the specific function of art as a tool to promote civic virtues, which he considered as fundamental to maintaining the social order.²

However, it would be in the 1840s when a liberal like José Victorino Lastarria would rise as one of the most critical liberal intellectuals of the colonial cultural model and of the scant development of the arts and sciences that occurred under Spanish rule.³ Shortly thereafter, Miguel Luis Amunátegui, a central figure in Chilean liberal thought, would concur with Lastarria's criticism.

One of the motives explaining the intellectuals' interest in the arts is related first to the relevance attributed by them to the "civilizing" process. Indeed, the arts were considered essential tools for cultural formation and consolidation of the nation. This was reflected in the efforts of the intellectual elite to strengthen a republican culture, which would be nurtured by enlightened ideas and regard academic art as the most appropriate manner of contributing to the education of the people as well as the construction of a historical and artistic national narrative.

One of the most important articles by Miguel Luis Amunátegui about the arts in Chile was published in the *Revista de Santiago* in 1849,⁴ precisely the time when the Italian painter Alejandro Ciccarelli inaugurated the Academia de Pintura in Chile.⁵ Paying particular attention to the formal

¹ CRUZ, Isabel. "Diosas atribuladas: alegorías cívicas, caricatura y política en Chile durante el siglo XIX". *Historia*. Santiago, Vol. 30, 1997, pp. 127-171; MAJLUF, Natalia. "De cómo reemplazar a un rey: retrato, visualidad y poder en la crisis de la independencia (1808-1830)". *Histórica*. Lima, Vol. 37, n° 1, 2013, pp. 73-108.

² On the classical artistic conceptions that early on began to permeate in the intellectual realm, see GUZMÁN, Fernando y YÁÑEZ, Eugenio. "La recepción de los clásicos en las concepciones de Juan Egaña acerca del arte". *Alpha*, Osorno, n° 37, Dic. 2013, pp. 135-136.

³ LASTARRIA, José Victorino. *Discurso de Incorporación de D.J. Victorino Lastarria a una Sociedad de Literatura de Santiago, en la Sesión del tres de mayo de 1842*. Valparaíso: Impr. De M. Rivadeneyra, 1842, p. 7.

⁴ AMUNÁTEGUI, Miguel Luis. "Apuntes sobre lo que han sido las Bellas-Artes en Chile". *Revista de Santiago*. Santiago, Tomo III, 1849, pp. 37-47.

⁵ On the principles that guided the creation of the Academy, see the inaugural speech of its first Director, Alejandro Ciccarelli: *Discurso pronunciado en la Inauguración de la Academia de Pintura por su Director D. Alejandro Ciccarelli*. Santiago: Imprenta Chilena, Marzo de 1849.

aspects of the paintings produced under Spanish rule, Amunátegui criticized the little dexterity of artists in an attempt to demonstrate the inferiority of colonial painting and legitimize the state's decision of installing the European canon in Chile through the creation of the Academy.⁶

According to Amunátegui, the weaknesses of colonial art and in particular that created by Quito artists, were primarily due to the difficulties they faced when adjusting to European artistic principles. In his opinion, the root of the Quito artists' problems rested in their inability to combine light and shadow as well as in their lack of dexterity in drawing and mastery of perspective, saying: "The individuals whom they represent in their canvases seem to be lying down and not standing up; that figure which the painter has wanted to portray in a remote place, in the background, the viewer perceives as if they were hobnobbing with the one who is painted in the foreground; in a word, they lack [skill when depicting] perspective."⁷ Finally, it was this lack of dominion of the academic rules guiding artists that drove them to depict "*mamarrachos*".⁸

Although Chilean intellectuals' judgment focused on formal aspects, this should be seen here as a way of distancing the stage of colonial artistic development from a new era that the training of new artists under the Academy's wing would usher. Ultimately, the creation of this artistic institution would signal the break with the system of colonial art, its aesthetic standards as well as its forms of production.

Thus, the intellectual left Latin American art in a highly disadvantageous position by erecting a virtually insurmountable barrier from the quality of European artworks that were beginning to arrive in the country.⁹ The opening of new markets immediately following Independence favored the circulation of art as well as the arrival of French and Italian artists in the country, which to a large extent stimulated a taste for European painting, especially at a time when the local context did not count on the expertise of antiquarians or specialized traders. In this way Amunátegui's comments took root in a context in which the Chilean public had shown itself to be receptive to European art, and had begun to share domestic space with local artworks.

An article bylined with the pseudonym Aristides, published in 1883, sheds light on the manner in which European artworks had begun to coexist with the colonial ones in the domestic spheres.

⁶ AMUNÁTEGUI, Miguel Luis. *Op. Cit.*, p. 44.

⁷ *Id. Ibid.*

⁸ *Id. Ibid.* Josefina de la Maza points out that Miguel Luis Amunátegui would have been the first to use this term. Regarding the use of "mamarracho" to describe colonial art, Josefina de la Maza asserts in her recent study that this word—which would be continued to be used in the nineteenth century to refer to colonial art as well as art whose quality was considered questionable—has strong formal and ideological ties with the colonial period. This term denoted an extravagant, disheveled, or imperfect object and was associated with total lack or poor development of taste. DE LA MAZA, Josefina, *De Obras Maestras y Mamarrachos*. Santiago: Metales Pesados, 2014, pp. 23-25.

⁹ By the 1840s, European painters had already arrived in Chile; one of them was the French painter Raymond Monvoisin, whose influence on local art, Josefina de la Maza recently analyzed. DE LA MAZA, Josefina, *Op. Cit.*, pp. 43-90.

It is necessary to not forget that while it is true that [for] now forty years some paintings of a truly superior merit adorned some of our aristocratic salons or covered the walls of a cloister, it is also true that alongside those paintings figured, without producing a violent dissonance, the grotesque and gaudy figures of the Quito school, which the bad taste of that time embraced with a certain complacency.¹⁰

This passage, therefore, suggests that the 1840s would have been instituted as a transitional period in the national artistic taste that already by the next decade would mark a turn, at least in the public sphere, toward the full embrace of the European cannon.

While this coexistence of art was taking place in the private sphere, the presence of colonial painting would be substantially reduced in the public realm. Indeed, some exhibitions of paintings organized in the 1850s and 1860s reveal the awareness that some individuals had of the instrumental role that exhibitions had in promoting European artistic models among the national public. A particularly interesting case is that of those exhibitions organized by private institutions such as the Sociedad de Instrucción Primaria (Society of Primary Instruction) – directed by Amunátegui himself – which ultimately reveal the limited space given to colonial artworks as well as of the limited mention that they received during these exhibitions.

In the case of the Exhibition of Painting that the Sociedad de Instrucción Primaria carried out in 1856, the organizers were not only members of said society, but also art collectors. That was the case of Marcial González, who requested the assistance of the then director of the Academy Alejandro Ciccarelli for the organization of the exhibition, demonstrating how private efforts combined with those of the state to promote European aesthetic values.¹¹

On that occasion were gathered 142 paintings, of which only three were colonial.¹² This demonstrated not only the existence of a large number of European works – mostly copies – in Chile, but the restricted visibility of colonial art in the public domain, in spite of the existence of a still significant number of colonial artworks in the private sphere.¹³

¹⁰ ARÍSTIDES. “Sobre el salón I”. *La Época*, 20 de septiembre de 1883, n° 651, s/p.

¹¹ DRIEN, Marcela. “Coleccionismo y secularización en Chile durante el siglo XIX”. En A.M. PIMIENIA HOFFMANN, *et al. História da arte: Colecoes, arquivos e narrativas*, Sao Paulo: Editora Urutau, 2015, pp. 73-81.

¹² *Catálogo de los cuadros que contiene la Exposición de Bellas Artes de la Sociedad de Instrucción Primaria*. Santiago: Imprenta del Ferrocarril, 1856.

¹³ Until then, and as Amunátegui had pointed out, the art made by artists from Quito had been especially popular among those within religious institutions and also in the private sector, due to its low cost. AMUNÁTEGUI, Miguel Luis. *Op. Cit.*, pp. 44-45. Although until the 1840s colonial art had enjoyed great popularity, Alexandra Kennedy has asserted that by the mid nineteenth century, commissions of colonial art had begun a slow but steady decline. According to the author, the immigration and settlement of artists from Quito in Chile could explain their strong commercial success and its strong presence in the country during the first half of the nineteenth century and up until 1870. For discussion of the circulation of

Although the presence of European art in the public realm did not necessarily mean the disappearance of colonial painting, it did emphasize a gradual displacement from the public realm, which would be accentuated in the following exhibitions.¹⁴ The gradual abandonment of colonial cultural and artistic notions expressed in the realm of exhibitions, was particularly significant because in the absence of fine arts museums – the first would be created in 1880 – exhibitions would become relevant spaces for the formation of public taste and therefore, of legitimizing artistic models.¹⁵

For the exhibition organized by the Sociedad de Instrucción Primaria in 1858, the liberal politician and historian Benjamín Vicuña Mackenna – also a member of this Society – produced a review that operated as a catalog and included reflections that pointed out not only the formal aspects of the artworks – which included copies of old masters paintings and contemporary art-, but appraisals revealing his interest for its stylistic definition. Indeed, unlike Amunátegui, Vicuña Mackenna resorted to his knowledge of the great periods in the history of European art to situate colonial art within this framework.

Although the exhibition did not include colonial artworks, there was no shortage of references to it. In his review of the works included in the exhibition, Vicuña Mackenna paid special attention to the role that art schools and painters had had in the development of art history. Accordingly, the relevance of the artwork lay in the prestige of its creators, and in its function as representative of the major European schools for which he showed great admiration.

Remarkably, throughout the text, Benjamín Vicuña Mackenna refers to colonial art on more than one occasion, drawing on comparisons and analogies demonstrating his interest in establishing the colonial aesthetic in the broader context of art history. Notably, the author did not establish a comparison between the Latin American Baroque and its European counterpart, as one might expect. Instead, he proposed colonial painting to be analogous to the so-called “Italian primitives”, saying:

The art of painting that made Greece and Rome glorious disappeared in the cataclysm of the barbarians in the span of ten to twelve centuries.

Its new era commences at the start of the twelfth century; and its initiative is due to, as perhaps all the major steps of human intelligence, to the chance of a day, to the inspiration of one man.

There lived in Florence in 1280 a celebrated painter named Juan Cimabué, whose paintings, which we have seen and that would today honor the cloisters of our convents in Santiago,

artworks made by Quito artists in Chile see: KENNEDY, Alexandra. “Circuitos artísticos interregionales: De Quito a Chile. Siglos XVIII y XIX”. *Historia*, Santiago, Vol. 31, 1998, pp. 87-111.

¹⁴ DRIEN, Marcela, *Op. Cit.*, pp. 73-81.

¹⁵ Pedro Lira himself, who was one of Chile’s most influential artists during the second half of the nineteenth century, asserted that the principal end of an exhibition was the education of the general public and the dissemination of taste. LIRA, Pedro. *La Exposición de Pinturas de 1867*. Santiago: Imprenta de la República, 1867, p. 2.

were paraded in triumph through the Florentine town, robbed of enthusiasm by those Madonnas that today would be overshadowed by those very ladies of Quito, if it would not be a desecration to only say it.¹⁶

The relation that Vicuña Mackenna establishes between both types of works suggests not only the existence of formal similarities between the Latin American Baroque artworks and thirteenth-century Italian paintings, but equivalences in their role as forerunners – in a Vasarian view – of periods of high artistic development. Vicuña Mackenna contends:

Giotto revolutionized the art world. He abandoned the old style known as the Byzantine, of which the Quito artists's renditions of our Christs, stiff as a stick and dripping with blood, are among the best examples, and he dedicated himself to copying nature. In this way the great secret of art was thus found anew and owes to this first step its gigantic successive achievements.¹⁷

Thus, the author situates the colonial in a sort of primitive stage, in an artistic context that has not yet reached maturity and, nevertheless, should be considered as part of the development of art history. This becomes significant because – in spite of the inadequacy of the academic standards – far from omitting or denying its aesthetic value, Vicuña Mackenna considered the colonial as part of the local art history account.

The foregoing reveals that when defining the archetype for the narrative of art history, Vicuña Mackenna has the Renaissance tradition in mind, which would have a central place in the exhibition of paintings itself. Indeed, in the exhibition copies of the works of the great masters of the Renaissance and Baroque would abound.

Unlike exhibitions of the 1850s, the one that the Sociedad de Instrucción Primaria organized in 1867 was the first to count on the support of a committee to select the artworks that would be exhibited and considered for the first time creating a catalog that would organize the artworks by groups and according to their distribution within the exhibition. This time, the exhibition would not include any colonial art nor make mention to this period.¹⁸

¹⁶ VICUÑA MACKENNA, Benjamín. *Una Visita a la Exposición de Pinturas de 1858. Por uno de los Comisionados de la Sociedad de Instrucción Primaria*. Santiago: Imprenta del País, 1858, pp. 7-8.

¹⁷ VICUÑA MACKENNA, Benjamín, *Op. Cit.*, pp. 7-8. The presence of the *Opere di Giorgio Vasari* (Trieste, 1857) in Benjamín Vicuña Mackenna's personal library suggests that the ideas expressed in this passage may be inspired in the criteria established by Giorgio Vasari. I would like to thank Fernando Guzmán for his kindness in sharing this reference with me. CRISTI, Mauricio. *Catálogo de la biblioteca i manuscritos de D. Benjamín Vicuña Mackenna. Segunda Parte*. Santiago: Imprenta Cervantes, 1886, p. 241.

¹⁸ According to the catalogue, the artworks were organized as follows: Originales Antiguos, Copias Europeas, Autores Modernos y Pintura Nacional. LIRA, Pedro, *Op. Cit.*, pp. 11-18.

While the 1867 exposition marked a silence with regarding to colonial art, this did not mean that the colonial culture would disappear from the exhibition realm. Led by Benjamín Vicuña Mackenna himself, the 1870s would take a radical turn towards recovering the legacy of the colonial through an exhibition that would gather its material vestiges: *La Exposición del Coloniaje* (The Exhibition of the Colonial).

Ultimately, it is possible to appreciate at least two different sets of criteria from which colonial art was evaluated. While Miguel Luis Amunátegui attempted to disassociate from colonial forms completely and to embrace European ones, Benjamín Vicuña Mackenna not only does not devalue the aesthetic worth of colonial art, but inserts it in the development of art history from the perspective of European aesthetic notions that will make themselves visible in the incipient national exhibition culture.